

After an election marred by bitter conflict

# Pratibha Patil becomes India's 13th president

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India's recently concluded and bitterly contested presidential election served to highlight several salient features of contemporary Indian politics. Most important of these are the crisis wracking the two largest parties, the Congress Party and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, and the crucial role that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front allies are playing in sustaining the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government.

Because the presidency is largely a ceremonial position with little true power except in times of extreme crisis and so as to bolster the notion that the president is "above politics," India's political establishment had hitherto maintained a certain decorum in choosing the country's president. In presidential elections past, the opposition frequently did not stand a candidate or, if it did, mounted only a token campaign.

By contrast, in the run-up to the July 19 presidential election, the UPA and the rival BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) mounted no-holds barred campaigns, including trading accusations of unsavory, corrupt, and criminal conduct.

Ultimately, the UPA candidate, Pratibha Patil, triumphed, winning almost two-thirds of the vote of a "presidential college" comprised of the members of the state, territorial, and national legislatures. Pivotal to the UPA victory was the support given its candidate by the Left Front and, to a lesser degree, by the Bahujan Samaj Party, which forms the government in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

A retired Congress politician and at the time of the presidential contest the governor of Rajasthan, Patil was sworn in as India's thirteen president on July 25.

The Congress, however, has little to celebrate. Patil is a colourless non-entity and is known to have been the UPA's fifth or sixth choice for the job—a "compromise" candidate proposed after the Congress, its UPA allies, and the Left Front had gone through weeks of fractious negotiations.

Patil's chief credentials for the job were that she is a woman and has an unblemished record as faithful toady of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that dominates the Congress Party apparatus.

If this were not bad enough, the BJP was soon able to rake up a series of scandals in which Patil or members of her family were implicated. These included her brother's reputed involvement in the murder of a rival Congress Party activist and allegations that a bank Patil had helped found, with the ostensible aim of providing credit to the less privileged, went bankrupt after steering loans to members of her extended family.

While not endorsing the tenor of the BJP's anti-Patil campaign, much of the corporate media expressed concern that she is "not above suspicion." Typical was the reaction of

magazine, which called her an "embarrassing choice."

Initially the leaders of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) enthusiastically promoted Patil's candidacy on the grounds that the selection of a woman-president would constitute a blow to gender oppression. However, as the stench surrounding Patil began to emerge, they took to hiding their embarrassment behind plastic smiles.

If the presidential election damaged the credibility of the Congress and the UPA, it was nothing short of a disaster for the opposition parties.

The attempt of the "third-front" United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA), a newly formed alliance of regional parties, to put up its own candidate fizzled. Ultimately it chose to abstain, but many AIDMK legislators broke ranks and voted for the BJP-supported candidate.

Since falling from power in 2004, the BJP, to the chagrin of much of India's corporate elite, has refused to play the role of a "loyal" opposition. Instead, it has sought at every opportunity to destabilize the UPA government, through obstruction or by mounting provocations. In keeping with this attitude, the BJP decided to mount a vigorous challenge for the presidency.

As its candidate the BJP chose Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the sitting vice president. Although Shekhawat was formerly a top BJP leader and is reputedly a lifelong member of the fascistic RSS, the BJP claimed that he was an "independent candidate" rather than a party nominee.

This backfired badly. The BJP had hoped to get the UNPA's support, but it balked at endorsing a candidate who as Rajasthan's Chief Minister in the early 1990s had given full support to the communalist agitation that culminated in the razing of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya and the worst communal bloodletting since Partition. Meanwhile several of the BJP's NDA allies sought to use the claim that Shekhawat was an independent candidate to justify their breaking ranks with the BJP.

In the end, some of the BJP's most important NDA allies, the ultra-right wing, Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena and the Trinamul Congress of West Bengal, failed to support Shekhawat. The Shiv Sena's legislators voted for the UPA nominee Patil on the grounds that they could not oppose a fellow Maharashtran.

There is now a serious question mark over the future of the NDA, at least as an alliance with sufficient regional support to form an alternative government.

In pursuit of various inner-party quarrels, even some BJP legislators in BJP-governed Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh rebelled, by either voting for the UPA's Patil or by writing Hindu religious slogans on their pro-Shekhawat ballots, thus invalidating them.

Under India's British-derived parliamentary system, the president is

nominally the head of state and commander of the armed forces, but, is expected in virtually all matters and at virtually all times to bow to the wishes of the sitting prime minister and parliament. However, under conditions where no party secures a parliamentary majority at the polls, or the government falls, the president plays a pivotal role in deciding which party or alliance of parties is given the opportunity to form a new government or whether fresh elections should be held.

The president's role in government formation is certainly a key reason why the presidency has now become the object of bitter political struggle.

From 1947 to 1989, the Congress formed India's government for all but two years and always did so commanding a parliamentary majority. Since then, India has been governed by a succession of minority and coalition governments.

The BJP-led NDA, which held office from 1998 to 2004, was comprised of more than twenty parties, although the BJP was far and away the most important constituent. The UPA is coalition of a dozen parties, but still requires the support of the 60-plus Left Front to survive in office.

Moreover, neither the Congress nor the BJP can look to the next general election, scheduled for 2009, with any confidence. The Congress has lost office in several states in the past year and both parties suffered a debacle in May's Uttar Pradesh state election.

Only as the leader of a multi-party coalition involving a host of smaller regional and casteist parties can either the Congress or BJP realistically hope to win office at the next election. Hence the overriding interest in having a "friendly" president.

The continuing erosion of support for both of the Indian bourgeoisie's principal political formations, is rooted in the mass opposition to the neo-liberal policies they have implemented. Privatisation, deregulation, social spending cuts and the reduction of agricultural price supports have resulted in increasing economic insecurity and social inequality.

As of yet this opposition has found only distorted and confused expression. Here the role of the CPM and its sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), have been decisive.

The Stalinists have supported the Indian bourgeoisie in effecting a strategic turn over the past 15 years, from a strategy based on state-led capitalist development to export-led growth and a new and closer alliance with international capital.

The Stalinist parties helped prop up the Narasimha Rao Congress government that initiated neo-liberal reform in 1991, and were the architects of the Third Front government of 1996-8 that pressed forward with the program of making India a cheap labour haven for global capitalist production. In the 2004 elections, the Left Front mustered support for the Congress and subsequently helped write the Common Minimum Program, the document that serves as a cover for the UPA's pro-big business agenda. In those states where the Left Front holds office, it has ruthlessly implemented pro-investor policies, including shooting down peasants at Nandigram, West Bengal, opposed to the seizure of their land for a special economic zone.

At the same time, the Stalinist parties have organized various protest movements and one-day general strikes to channel the mass opposition back toward the existing political structures.

In an attempt to place some rhetorical distance between it and the UPA government, the CPI recently called for the Left Front to "review" its relations with the UPA. However, the CPM leadership quickly shot down this proposal. It declared such a review pointless, since there can be no question of withdrawing support for the UPA.

Both Stalinist parties have justified their support for the current Congress-led government on the grounds that it is the only means of blocking the return to power of the BJP.

Initially the CPM did suggest that it might support a candidate other than that nominated by the Congress in the election for vice-president to be held later this month. However, after the presidential debacle the CPM leadership concluded such a manoeuvre could further destabilize the UPA. Instead it took the initiative in steering the UPA to quickly arrive at a consensus vice-presidential candidate.

In secret consultations the CPM urged the Congress to make Mohammad Hamid, the head of the National Commission for Minorities, its candidate. When the Congress agreed, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat accepted Congress President Sonia Gandhi's request that he convince the Congress's UPA allies to rally behind Hamid's candidacy.

Thus the CPM is not just propping up the Congress-led UPA. It plays a pivotal role in the inner working and dynamics of the UPA itself. Such is the integration of the CPM into the political establishment, there was even talk in the corporate media that the current speaker of parliament, CPM leader Somnath Chatterjee, might be the UPA's vice-presidential nominee.

There has been much hand wringing in the corporate media over the presidential election. India's elite is concerned that the presidency has been politically weakened, with the result that Patil may lack the popular legitimacy to intervene effectively in a future crisis. Many of the same newspaper editorialists who chastised the Congress for foisting the feeble and tarnished Patil on the nation, are now demanding that the opposition rally behind the new president.

Declared the *Deccan Chronicle*, "The nation will hope and pray that Ms Patil's assumption of the high office will erase the rancour, bitterness and naked partisanship that sullied the presidential contest, and herald a democratically healthier atmosphere of political accommodation and understanding enabling her to discharge her constitutional obligations ... Uninhibited and uninfluenced by the compulsions of past political associations and loyalties, Ms Patil must let the Constitution be her sole guide, national interests her sole motivation and impartiality and fairness her abiding principles".



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